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The Six Domains of Leadership

B Y S I M B . S I T K I N , E . A L L A N L I N D , A N D S A N Y I N S I A N G

In our roles at the Fuqua/Coach K Center on Leadership & Ethics (COLE), we have the opportunity to interact with a wide variety of executives and students. Some are skeptics and others are hopeful. The skeptics ask us, How can you teach leadership? Isn't leadership innate—either you have it or you don't? The optimists ask us, How can we become better leaders?

To the skeptics, we respond that leaders are both born and made. Everyone is endowed with distinctive strengths and weaknesses that affect their capacity for leadership. However, most fall short of fully maximizing their leadership potential. Our role as educators is to help our students to better leverage their capabilities.

To the optimists, we say that leadership is about behaviors and not traits or personalities. There is no one “leadership type.” Everyone has seen great leaders who are quietly inspiring and others who possess larger-than-life personalities. Leadership is ultimately about what you do and how that affects the perception of who you are. For example, if people understand what you stand for as a person and perceive you as caring about them, they will respond with loyalty and trust. Leaders can be made and improved upon if they can analyze their behaviors within a framework, understand the types and interactions of behaviors that result in effective leadership, and modify their behaviors based on that understanding.

So what is leadership?

Leadership is not about prestige, power, or status; it is about influence and persuasion. It is not based on position, nor is it solely a matter of hierarchical relationships—it is as much about leading one's superiors and one's peers as it is about leading one's direct reports. You can have an organization in which everyone is a leader and exhibits leadership behavior.

Leadership focuses on creating organizations, changing organizations, and sustaining organizations as they confront internal and external obstacles. In this way, we view *leadership* as being distinctive from *management*, with leadership focusing more on people and creating value and management focusing more on systems, implementation, and processes. One is not more important than the other, and both have key roles to play in any organization.

Six Domains of Leadership

Several years ago, two of us (Sitkin and Lind) undertook the development of a leadership framework based on strong theory and a broad base of scholarship, but we sought also to develop a model that would work well in the everyday world of leadership action. We reviewed leadership research and theory in organizational behavior as well as related topics such as work on trust, fairness, and control, and we examined what social, political, and cognitive psychology and sociology and political science had to say about leadership. (This research will be described in greater detail in our forthcoming book.) In our research, six distinct clusters of leadership behaviors emerged, each with its own distinct effects on followers. These six *domains*—personal leadership, relationship leadership, contextual leadership, inspirational leadership, supportive leader-

ship, and ethical leadership—together create a comprehensive and dynamic model of leadership activities, as illustrated in Figure 1.

This view of leadership behaviors as encompassed by the six domains includes not only intellectual aspects of leadership but also emotional and reflective aspects that



FIGURE 1.
LEADERSHIP DOMAINS AND EFFECTS

The placement of the domains in the framework shows their relationship to each other and the effects they produce, as indicated by the surrounding circles. For example, the relational domain is in the center because leadership is ultimately about the leader-follower dynamic, and its effect of trust is an element that percolates through all types of leadership situations. The three foundational domains become the building blocks for the next tier of domains—inspirational and supportive leadership. For ethical leadership at the pinnacle to be most effective, all five supporting domains must be in place.

encompass individual leaders, their relationships with others, and their ties to a larger community. This allows the model to speak to leaders and students of leadership at multiple levels. On an individual level, it motivates people to explore their own leadership potential. On a team level, it encourages team members and team leaders to reflect on interpersonal relationships, including their skills in developing emotional connections with others and their willingness to both support and challenge others as needed. On an organizational level, it provides leaders with a contextual platform to accept the responsibilities of being a leader capable of inspiring a sense of communal pride. The framework is also noteworthy for its focus on behaviors, its integrative and dynamic conceptualization of leadership, and its grounding in a diverse range of scholarly disciplines.

We will provide a brief overview of the six domains, the behaviors associated with each, and the effects that they create in the follower.

Foundational Domains— Personal, Relational, and Contextual Leadership

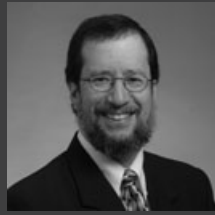
Personal leadership: Leaders need to be seen as personally capable of leading, as authentic, and as dedicated to the team. Each leader needs to establish credibility in terms of vision and experience. In the eyes of the followers, is this person qualified to lead them? Does this leader have an idea of where the team or organization should be heading and how to get them there? Is that goal ultimately what's good for the overall organization and consistent with the values espoused by the members of

the team? In preparing for this, did the leader take the time to understand the environment and the challenges associated with a particular goal?

At the end of the day, people want to be led by a real person and not by a title or role. In the personal leadership domain, leaders must develop and exhibit an authentic leadership style that projects who they are and what they stand for. Followers also need to see their leaders demonstrate passion and commitment to the organization—does the leader have skin in the game, so to speak. In this domain, leaders need to have their words backed up by their actions. We've heard stories of senior executives in organizations that try to effect a change—only to fail because they themselves were not perceived as embracing the change they championed. At the end of the day, it helps when a leader's actions are consistent and predictable.

When a potential leader shows good personal leadership by demonstrating capability, authenticity, and dedication, the consequence is credibility.

Relational leadership: If personal leadership is about the ability to project one's self and one's values to create a leadership persona, relational leadership is about the ability of the leader to demonstrate understanding and respect for the follower and care for that individual's welfare. Does the leader view the followers as real people with distinct strengths and weaknesses and emotions or just as a means to an end? To show an understanding and appreciation of others, the leader must be able to engage the team and give them a voice for their perspectives—and



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then listen to that sharing of ideas and demonstrate its real value going forward.

Just as people need to be led by someone real, they also desire to be understood, respected, and cared about.

Does the leader show genuine concern for the followers? This kind of concern can be illustrated by something as simple as a thank-you note or as complex as establishing a job search support strategy for every displaced employee after a major layoff.

In becoming a strong relational leader, one must also be able to talk honestly with individuals on the team and with the team as a whole. This may involve transparency in making a decision or providing honest feedback about an individual's performance. When strong relational leadership is present, the leader and followers will have built trust.

Contextual leadership: Today, more than ever, people's identities are linked strongly to their organization. More and more, people derive their sense of self from their work, and good contextual leaders foster and harness this sense of identity for the good of the team and its goals. In the contextual leadership domain, leaders create a sense of communal identity for the team by helping the members see what the team's values and mission are and what the team stands for as a whole.

Furthermore, the strong contextual leader is able to create a sense of coherence and effective coordination by clarifying for the members the structures, procedures, norms, and practices that are in place. Why do these systems and procedures exist and how do they fit into

our organization and mission? More important, what is my role as a member of this team, where do I fit, and where do others fit? In achieving this, the contextual leader can center the team members and generate a sense of shared identity, pride, and belonging in the team. The effect of strong contextual leadership is a strong community.

Middle Tier Domains—Inspirational and Supportive Leadership

The placement of the domains in the framework shows their relationship to each other. For example, the relational domain is in the center because leadership is ultimately about the leader-follower dynamic and its effect of trust is an element that percolates through all types of leadership situations. The three foundational domains become the building blocks for the next tier of domains—inspirational and supportive leadership.

Inspirational leadership: Jack Welch said that when you leave people to set goals for themselves, the goals that they set are usually higher than the ones the leader would have set for them. Inspirational leadership, then, is not about imposing standards but about creating a climate and expectation of excellence, generating the will to reach

higher, and infusing the team with the enthusiasm and optimism for getting there.

When people think about leadership, the notion of the inspirational leader usually comes to mind. However, it is important to remember the inspirational domain is not about charisma or charm—rather, it is about behavior that helps create change in others. Inspirational leaders help people imagine things as they



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can be, and then fuel the followers' desire to pursue that vision. People want to invest in something that they see as being bigger than themselves, and the inspirational leader is able to help them understand why the vision is worthy of their best efforts and that the vision is achievable. Ultimately, the inspirational leader creates a culture of passion that results in high aspirations among the team members.

An entrepreneurial organization in which resources are limited but goals are grand, a leading organization that needs to make sure that its people continue to innovate instead of becoming complacent, an organization in crisis in which morale is low—all require inspirational leadership. All these situations call for followers to step outside their comfort zones to achieve the seemingly impossible, and it is the leader's job to help them to make that step.

The inspirational leadership domain rests on the personal and relational domains. It is built on the authenticity and the level of commitment of the leader and requires a perception of credibility from the followers. The followers would want to win for the leader as well as for the team. Asking people to step outside their comfort zones also requires a high degree of trust—trust in the leader to set a vision that is for the good of the overall team, trust in the leader to be there for the group, and trust that the leader understands what they are truly capable of. This trust can only come from a foundation of good relational leadership.

Supportive leadership: If inspirational leadership is about showing people they can fly, supportive leadership is about giving them a landing strip, a plane, a map, and

good flight instructions. Supportive leadership is about providing a sense of security to the team so that members will take intelligent risks and continue to grow in their roles. It is a conditional security, however, one that rests alongside the challenge of inspirational leadership, providing cover for the adventurous—not shelter for the lazy.

A number of behaviors help establish that sense of security. One is the leader's ability to provide internal support. Does the leader help team members get the resources and tools they need in order to reach the goal? For example, are the rules and systems in place and is additional training provided if needed? This also involves the leader understanding the limitations of the team and what it is capable and incapable of. Team members derive security from knowing that the leader understands their strengths and weaknesses, and hence will not push them beyond the limits of their abilities. In leading subordinates, a supportive leader creates a safety net for the team to take intelligent risks. In leading up, a supportive leader engages his or her superiors in understanding the situation and the required resources needed to accomplish the goals of the organization. Hence supportive leadership rests on the relational leadership domain and its associated trust effect, and on the clarification and understanding of different roles and functions within the team that is part of good contextual leadership.

A second aspect of supportive leadership involves providing a buffer against external forces that can distract or hamper the team, reducing its effectiveness. The supportive leader deals with politics external



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to the team and limits the potential intervention from external bureaucracy, creating a space for the team that allows team members to focus on the goals at hand.

Finally, a sense of security can be derived from creating a culture of learning and shifting away from a culture of blame. The tendency to blame when things go wrong is natural and instinctive, but blame is poison for team spirit. The supportive leader focuses the team members on honestly acknowledging and addressing the issues at hand instead of pointing fingers. The leader may engage the team in an after-action debrief to celebrate successes as well as identify areas for improvement. A recent *BusinessWeek* cover story ("How Failure Breeds Success," July 10, 2006), illustrated the innovations that resulted from lessons learned in the aftermath of great failures. In the article, several celebrated leaders tell how they have learned from failure. These leaders are where they are today because of supportive leaders along the way who gave them the room to make those mistakes and learn from them.

This security leads to a collective confidence in the team's abilities and in each team member's intentions. It gives room for the team members to develop as leaders themselves and mentor others in their leadership development. The effect of good supportive leadership is to make it possible for team members to take the initiative to make intelligent decisions and to undertake informed independent action. The team becomes sustainable without the need for the constant presence of the current leader at the top.

■
The inspirational domain is not about charisma or charm.
■

Pinnacle Domain—Ethical Leadership

While the other five domains focus on what makes one an effective leader, the ethical domain looks at what makes one not just an effective leader, but a *good* leader. When one is a leader, one's actions and decisions affect the lives of others. Leaders have an obligation to think in terms of what is profitable, but they also need to balance that against what is good for the team, organization, and larger society. They are called to balance the long-term and short-term goals in terms of what is good for everyone involved. Creating a work-life balance falls under this notion.

Ethical leaders are role models for their organization and they develop others into role models as well. They personify the organization, and through their action, they show by example how to integrate the values espoused by the organization in a way that is true to their own values.

Ethical leaders also engage followers in shaping organizational values and holding each other accountable to those values. They foster a sense of ownership in the fate of the organization. Part of this involves engaging the team in making the difficult trade-offs that the organization may have to face. For example, should the organization participate in the practice of bribery when doing business in countries in which bribery is the norm or risk losing to competitors? Should the organization expend its resources to purchase goods that are costlier but more environmentally friendly?

When strong ethical leadership exists, people derive a great sense of pride from the organization and take

ownership of the organization's actions. The effect of the ethical domain is stewardship in which every follower sees the organization as "my house."

Conclusion

Some perceive leadership as an art rather than a science. To be sure, leadership results from a complex mix of instinct, conscious decision, and action based on the situation, the people involved, the goals, and the experience of the individual leader. However, it

■
*Blame is poison
for team spirit.*
■

is more accessible than trying to imagine the next work of an artist's intuition and creativity. Six distinct domains of behavior interact with one another to create a sense of

loyalty, trust, community, high aspirations, independent judgment, and stewardship among the followers. In learning about and reflecting upon one's own behaviors, in engaging others, and in being open about their perceptions of those behaviors in

the context of these six domains, one can learn to be a better and more effective leader. ■